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## **L1 educators writing together in hybrid professional learning communities: International perspectives**

### **Reflecting with my tribe**

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#### **Context**

The National Curriculum (NC) in England is 30 years old this year, although it is not an anniversary that is being celebrated by many English teachers. The NC effectively dictates what teachers have to teach, particularly as it determines the content of GCSE<sup>1</sup> specifications, with the assessed outcomes made publicly available. It has gone through 7 iterations, the most recent (DfE, 2014) being the most prescriptive and limiting yet. Its critics are not arguing against assessment per se; rather, they are concerned with the *form* of the assessment, how data is used (or misused) for accountability purposes, and how the resulting ‘reductive, ideological and pedestrian’ (Barrs, 2019, n.p) curriculum impacts on both teachers and learners.

Most English teachers still enter the profession because they are passionate about their subject (Blake and Shortis, 2010) and wish to practice a creative pedagogy borne out of their commitment to a child-led, personal growth view of English (Fleming and Stevens, 2010; Goodwyn, 2016). They find themselves ‘profoundly at odds’ (Goodwyn, 2016: 7) with a prescriptive agenda, and angry that teachers and students are too often denied the opportunity to focus on what they believe really matters – ‘the local, the particular’ (Yandell and Brady, 2016: 46). The ‘more individualistic and creative aspects of the job’ (Perryman et al, 2019 n.p.) are being lost to ‘an accountability system that squeezes the last drop of joy out of day-to-day teaching’ (Williams, 2017 *in* Perryman 2019 n.p).

In terms of writing, ‘Artistry and creativity’ have declined significantly in recent years (Cremin, 2016: 3). Good practice is overturned, with many teachers – stuck in a system not of their own making – typically requiring their classes to write *in preparation for tests* rather than in preparation for life (Cremin and Myhill, 2019; Barrs, 2019). The accountability tail wags the curriculum dog.

As a direct result of these ‘stifling’ (Perryman, 2019: n.p.) restrictions on creative practice, many English teachers are simply quitting. This haemorrhaging of professionals is not just a problem in terms of supply: an additional concern is the loss of collective memory. Hence, many newer English teachers, weaned in schools where accountability is all-dominant, have narrow conceptions of what counts as writing and low opinions of themselves as writers (Cremin and Oliver, 2017; Smith and Wrigley 2015). As well as matters of lesson content and style being vulnerable, are ‘crucial questions about conduct and sensibility’ (Green and Cormack: 2008, n.p). As we were warned twenty years ago:

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<sup>1</sup> General Certificate of Secondary Education, sat by all 15-16 year olds

*'Teachers cannot develop the creative abilities of their pupils if their own creative abilities are suppressed.'* (from *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*, National Advisory Committee on Creative & Cultural Education Report, 1999, p.90)

However, there is evidence of a counter-movement that encourages teachers to become 'disruptive professionals' (Thomas, 2019: n.p.) or act quasi-subversively as creative practitioners (Smith, 2019). One agent of change is the National Writing Project (NWP.org.uk), a grass-roots voluntary organisation based on the NWP in the United States. Established in 2009 in the UK, the NWP provides teachers with space to write, share and discuss writing pedagogy; and with solace and companionship in troubled times. It now has around 20 groups across England, communities of practice that encourage teachers to retain some 'autonomy and creativity' (Barrs, 2019: n.p.) in supporting young writers.

This inquiry begins to explore how membership of a NWP group has impacted upon secondary English teachers' conceptualisation of writing and the teaching of writing. In parallel with projects undertaken in Australia and Israel – where the literature reveals similar concerns about accountability and regulation (Parr et al, 2019) , it reports on how teachers' reflections on their own writing histories, belonging to a NWP community and considering their writing histories within that community help to inform their understanding of writing and the teaching of writing. It does not seek to offer an easy correlation between writing teachers and success in examinations (although it does suggest that writing teachers increase student engagement, which may lead on to good grades). Rather, it suggests affordances of writing beyond exam grades, a greater and more emancipatory view.

### **Methodology: a brief introduction to hermeneutics**

Writing is, of course, a visual manifestation of language. Language can be defined as 'a carrier of the experience of being' (Palmer, 1969: 213), with history as the reservoir and language as the water in which we are immersed. Yet language *alone* is not enough: language needs to be *understood*, *interpreted* for communication to happen - hence our interest in hermeneutics, which has 'human communication, language and discourse at its centre' (Gardner, 2010: 39). Hermeneutics may be used not only to interpret individual texts, but the whole socio-historic world - we use our imagination to see through another's eyes to come to a hermeneutic understanding (Sherratt, 2006).

Concerned with finding meanings through interpretation, hermeneutics is therefore a *creative* paradigm. A researcher seeks an open-ended dialogue with the texts, conscious that the process is dialectic, yet aware that ambiguity is likely - even helpful - in opening up new horizons (Gadamer, 2004; Kinsella, 2016).

### **Research design**

Hermeneutics is particularly valid for this inquiry because we are interested in teachers' writing histories and writing pedagogy (both of which involve *language* and the *imagination*). This paper represents (re-presents) the voices of the English teachers involved.

The participants are all secondary English practitioners who are members of three separate NWP groups in the south of England. Two groups have been established for six years; one is just a year old. Each includes teachers at various career stages, from heads of department to trainees. They meet in their own time, in twilight sessions or Saturday mornings.

The participants for this project are self-selected; 6-10 teachers from each group volunteered to take part. The research used a series of 90-minute workshops, one for each group, undertaken as part of that group’s usual meeting. The workshops (see Table 1) were designed by colleagues in Monash University and used by the research teams in the three jurisdictions to enable international comparisons at a later date.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Introduction to the project; ethical considerations (5 mins)</li><li>● Whole group discussion of the short story <i>I just wanna be average</i> (Rose, 1989) (plus select quotations from Peter Elbow and James Britton) and how they relate to personal experience of writing and teaching (15)</li><li>● Teachers think of 5 ‘snapshots’ from their own writing histories and write them on cards (10)</li><li>● Small group share and sort for common themes (10)</li><li>● Each teacher chooses ONE card to elaborate in writing (20)</li><li>● Small group sharing and discussion (15)</li><li>● Whole group discussion (15)</li></ul> <p><i>Individual writing and whole group discussions recorded as data</i></p>
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Table 1

The short story (Rose, 1989), read in advance by the participants, is a first-person reflection on the transformative effect a teacher had on the writer’s self-esteem and progress: through ‘immersing [him] in language’ (1989: 5), the teacher enabled him to transcend the ‘limiting boundaries’ (1989: 7) of his home.

The resulting writing and the transcribed audio were then analysed using the hermeneutic three-tier approach described by Kinsella (2016). We here report on what emerged: what the UK participants see as formative experiences in their own writing histories; how they feel membership of a writing group has developed their own writing and their views on themselves as writers; and how they have used these experiences to inform their teaching, and the effect of this on students’ learning. The themes here discussed were common across the groups. We quote liberally to honour individuals’ voices, minimising commentary in order to allow their words to be heard and interpreted by the reader.

1 What do teachers see as formative experiences in their writing?

While the teachers who attend NWP groups are self-evidently predisposed towards writing, they do not all self-identify as 'writers'. One or two NWP writers are published authors of novels and short stories, and others write regularly, but many come to their first session having not written since their own schooldays. Considering their writing histories helped them to contextualise their writing today.

Some remember how, from an early age, the power of adult interest helped develop their writing identity. One recalls being encouraged, aged around 7, to 'bang out' a newspaper on her father's typewriter, which she did with 'percussive aggression' (AT2/J). For others, that adult interest came from a teacher, mirroring the narrative in the Rose story:

*We had a lovely teacher when I was about nine [who] gave us a creative writing journal, and I could be the best at something! I was not the best at maths and I was not the best at sport. This was suddenly my thing ... (AT1/J:3)*

They remember particularly those teachers who cultivated their agency by allowing them to choose their own direction. One discovered her writing identity, aged 10, through becoming the central character in her own Narnia stories, imitating and adapting characters, plotlines and devices from a favourite author.

Not all spoke of formative experiences involving adults, however. For some, inspiration to write came from within. Those who had, as teenagers, felt the allure of becoming published writers, identified the precious secrecy of writing that was an extension and exploration of their own identities:

*The notebook in my pocket was as essential a part of my 'leaving-the-house-possessions' as my keys, my eye-liner and my wallet. (ST2/S:6)*

Yet writing identities may be fluid, not fixed. Another teacher reflected on his writing history as an adult. He describes experiencing an epiphany about his writing identity:

*I stopped wanting to be a published writer many, many years ago. I got two thirds of the way through a novel and I thought, What am I doing this for? But then I discovered that I actually loved writing ... I sat in a shed in Cornwall. But I wasn't in a shed in Cornwall, I was actually in my home town when I was nine... and I suddenly realised that a week had gone by, and I'd been writing just because I loved it, but without any view of getting it published. That was a big turning point. (BT1/P:12)*

He had realised the rewards in writing are not merely pecuniary, but personal; writing is a space in which to grow, reflect and learn, and it can be a joy.

Teachers who kept – and still keep - diaries, remember the special sense of ownership and identity which this form of writing affords. They value the pace and process of personal writing: by re-constructing relationships they cope with emotional turbulence and increase self-knowledge; and through open and provisional writing, they generate ideas:

*Putting things down on paper makes you slow down ... You go back + re-read, add, cross out. You look at the words on the page, you move them + shape them + they are there to be played with. You can develop these ideas or keep them as simple as possible. (AW/C)*

Some suggested that although diary-writing originally appeared banal, it has the potential to suggest literary possibilities and reveal patterns when revisited. When re-reading their past writing, teachers can 'read it with a different eye' (ST2/A:10) and empathise with their younger selves.

This acknowledges the value of returning to a piece of writing. Reflection allows for hermeneutic understanding, through recognising that the piece is read from a different perspective; just as we might change our minds on published writers we re-read, teachers can re-evaluate their own histories. As a result, they better 'understand and feel empathy with' (BW/E:3) their students.

## **2. How are teachers writing now? How have writing groups developed teachers' own writing and their writing identities?**

The theme of writing as therapeutic develops when teachers consider their current practice - writing provides restorative personal space:

*it's that little dopamine haven that I'm sort of ring-fencing for myself this year.... [Daily writing] contributes to my work as being the thing I do to switch off from work... It's my little ring-fenced thirty minutes or so. (BT2/Dn:2-3)*

*I suddenly realised that [writing] is what I need to do, every day, just a little bit, just to have a bit of space for myself (AT2/A:5)*

Experiencing the therapeutic nature of writing themselves inspires teachers to want to help their students write too, to benefit from the 'emotional management – the mental health management' (ST2/B:3)<sup>2</sup> that they have learnt personal writing can enable.

However, making space for writing can be difficult:

*Sometimes our heads are so full of other stuff and anxieties... [that] being creative would probably be a great outlet but it's sometimes hard to find that place... (BT2/Pa:8)*

Simply having a safe context in which to write, therefore, is one of the benefits of writing in a group. Being part of a community provides reassurance. A writing group is a place to experiment, collaborate, talk and reflect. One teacher wrote of how life constantly requires us to compare ourselves to others (BT2/D): the group is a refuge from this, engendering a sense of belonging. A teacher in a different group noted, similarly:

*When I do these writing things, I feel that I'm with my tribe. (ST2/T:11)*

It says something for the nature of the groups that the atmosphere is not competitive, but mutually supportive. Those who arrived at their first NWP session less confident in their writing ability are surprised by the generative nature of writing, and how writing for a trusted audience enables them to tap into writing skills of which they were unaware:

*A: I didn't realise that I had written a poem until the group told me... I surprised myself in the doing of that and getting that response.*

*M: When I did my first writing group, I definitely didn't see myself as a writer ... but when I read it, I was just like, 'Wow, where did that come from?'* (AT2/A&M:p3-4)

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<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, while teachers recognise the therapeutic value to students in writing freely - *unburdening hurt* (AW/S) - they are cautious about dealing with the fall-out of such writing *because it's a loaded process* for which they are *untrained* (AT2/A & M:2).

Ownership of the term 'writer' remains contested. One teacher describes herself as an *imposter* (BT1/R:6); another notes,

*I don't consider myself a writer, in the same way as, even though I play the piano every now and again, I don't consider myself a musician... (AT2/M:2);*

but others suggest that it is important to acknowledge what we do and to challenge writing 'elites':

*I say I am a writer to challenge what people think writers are, which to me is somebody who writes... I'm not a published writer, but, yes I am a writer... definitely in the classroom (AT2/A:2-3)*

### **3. How have writing teachers developed their teaching, with what effect on their students' learning and writing?**

Teachers draw on their own progress and identities as writers within a trusted group when re-shaping and strengthening their own teaching philosophies. They reflect on how they themselves developed confidence and gained inspiration:

*I feel this group's really valuable, to talk to everybody... to get feedback, to get ideas, to kind of support each other. (BT2/Pa:6)*

Participation in the groups re-emphasises the *process* of writing as a thinking and learning space where premature closure is resisted. Such practice reaffirms teachers as creative agents, despite being caught in an educational system in which accountability – 'we are *constantly* assessing' (BT1/P:4) - limits their professional latitude:

*It's heart-breaking, because it's like painting by numbers, writing by numbers. (BT1/R:8)*

Teachers have found themselves torn between a professional responsibility to 'empower' students to examination success, without impeding them to think independently and express themselves freely.

However, through their writing - and understanding that participation in a NWP group has contributed to their writing history - they identify a re-orientation of their pedagogy, noting a reciprocity between their writing and teaching. This is manifested through attending more sympathetically to students' writing and having '*a little bit more of a forgiving voice*' (BT2/Pa:3) with their pupils, but also in their pedagogy.

Several noted that, through developing confidence in their own writing, they have learnt to become explicit in their teaching. Having understood the place of 'the mechanics and engineering and architecture of writing' (BT1/R:6) in her own work, one teacher felt better able to explain structure to her students; others have greater confidence to model writing 'live' (ST2/B:12), thereby providing their students insight into the thinking process that precedes writing.

Further, teachers speak enthusiastically about the impact of writing alongside their students:

*They hear me scribbling things out and they see my face when I get frustrated and I think they kind of go, 'Oh that's all right, I'm normal because that's what Miss is doing'... that has... been a huge benefit [and] had such a powerful effect on them... these were quite disengaged kids. (ST2/B:19)*

*I read [my story] out, and it was quite a tough class and they gave me a spontaneous round of applause, and after that, our relationship shifted. (AT2/M:4-5)*

Those who write to the same brief as their students find that shared practice not only encourages their students, but also sharpens their own pedagogy:

*I came up against the same sort of problems that they came up against. I discovered... I wasn't doing the thing that I'd been trying to teach them to do all along. And that meant that I started to teach... in a completely different way... [and as a result] the quality of their essays improved overnight. (BT1/P:11)*

This is, of course, a bold and unsubstantiated claim, but it illustrates the new confidence that teacher found.

And, as they diversify their pedagogy, teachers are also determined to diversify writing stimuli; they are inspired to provide opportunities for students beyond mere test preparation that include words like 'play' and 'experiment' (ST2/T:18). The same teacher cited immediately above noted,

*I do more creative writing, more story writing, more story-telling now than I did in the ten or 15 years prior... I do Creative Writing Fridays every Friday now. Never had them before... it's a new departure... and it's reinvigorated my love of teaching. (BT1/P:4)*

These two examples suggest that the impact of the NWP has an ongoing impact on his practice, both in the organisation of the curriculum and his approach; and sharing these ideas with colleagues encourages them to take risks and experiment too.

Others recognise that just as their own motivation to write, and teach writing 'their' way, is fostered by belonging to a non-judgemental NWP community, learners' motivation, autonomy and self-regulation is less inhibited when the teacher withholds judgement.

*We have a dedicated writing lesson once a fortnight for key stage 3 (ages 12-14) – they have a separate book – it's marked very rarely... it's just like... Let's have a play... to show that writing can be fun. (ST2/B:18)*

Those teachers have changed their practice accordingly, believing that students are writers with their own agency and their own voices.

There is a symbiotic relationship: classroom demonstration and the explicit teaching of techniques have, in turn, strengthened teachers' own writing identities:

*I was never explicitly taught these techniques [but] through teaching it, it has actually made me a better writer... the identity of the writer is only really one that I've taken on since I've become an English educator. (BW/E:3)*

## **Concluding thoughts**

We have demonstrated here that, through supporting teachers to think about their own writing histories (both as beginning writers and as members of a NWP group), perspectives may be exposed that stimulate rich discussion.

This research suggests that re-visiting their respective writing histories enables teachers to articulate key understandings, for themselves and for others. Our participants re-discovered the emotions of



the writing process, re-lived formative memories, refined their thoughts. Reflecting on their writing pasts allows teachers an opportunity to take a step back, and capture potentially important ideas about their pedagogy. Collaboration enables them to share how, despite remaining caught within the restrictions and strictures of an accountability culture, they might develop their own and their students' agency as writers and learners, and extend the writing offer in schools well beyond obligatory tests.

Providing a forum such as a NWP group to support teachers look back at their own writing pasts, and discuss this with colleagues, enables them to understand what they are doing in the present and look forward with hope.

**Key:**

AT      Alperton Transcript

BT      Bristol Transcript

ST      Sussex Transcript

Initials after / refer to individual speakers, followed by page reference

AW      Alperton Writing

BW      Bristol Writing

SW      Sussex Writing

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